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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest summarizes Robert E. Slavin's 1986 comprehensive review of research on the different types of ability grouping in elementary schools. Slavin examines evidence on the achievement effects of five comprehensive ability grouping plans in elementary schools: (1) ability grouped classroom assignment; (2) regrouping within grade level for reading and mathematics; (3) the Joplin plan--regrouping across grade levels for reading; (4) the nongraded plan--grouping according to performance rather than age; and (5) within-class ability grouping. The digest summarizes the effects found, and presents Slavin's recommendations for schools and teachers regarding ability grouping. (PCB)

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ERIC Digest

Ability Grouping in Elementary Schools

John Hollifield

What Is Ability Grouping?

Ability grouping of students is one of the oldest and most controversial issues in elementary and secondary schools. Hundreds of research studies have examined the effects of the two most common variants: between-class and within-class ability grouping. Between-class grouping refers to a school's practice of forming classrooms that contain students of similar ability. Within-class grouping refers to a teacher's practice of forming groups of students of similar ability within an individual class.

This digest summarizes the conclusions of Robert E. Slavin's 1986 comprehensive review of research on the different types of ability grouping in elementary schools. The purpose of his review was to identify grouping practices that promote student achievement.

Why Use Ability Grouping?

In theory, ability grouping increases student achievement by reducing the disparity in student ability levels, and this increases the likelihood that teachers can provide instruction that is neither too easy nor too hard for most students. The assumption is that ability grouping allows the teacher (1) to increase the pace and raise the level of instruction for high achievers, and (2) to provide more individual attention, repetition, and review for low achievers. The high achievers benefit from having to compete with one another, and the low achievers benefit from not having to compete with their more able peers.

One of the main arguments against ability grouping is that the practice creates classes or groups of low achievers who are deprived of the example and stimulation provided by high achievers. Labeling students according to ability and assigning them to low-achievement groups may also communicate self-fulfilling low expectations. Further, groups with low performance often receive a lower quality of instruction than other groups. Slavin sees as the most compelling argument against ability grouping its creation of academic elites, a practice which goes against democratic ideals.

How Does Grouping Affect Student Achievement?

In his review, Slavin examines evidence on the achievement effects of five comprehensive ability grouping plans in elementary schools. His review draws conclusions about the effectiveness of the following grouping plans: ability grouped class assignment, regrouping for reading or mathematics, the Joplin Plan, nongraded plans, and within-class ability grouping.

Ability Grouped Class Assignment. This grouping plan places students in one self-contained class on the basis of ability or achievement. In some departmentalized upper elementary grades, the class may move as a whole from teacher to teacher. Evidence suggests that ability grouped class assignment does not enhance student achievement in the elementary school.

Regrouping for Reading and Mathematics. Under this plan, students are assigned to heterogeneous homeroom classes for most of the day, but are regrouped according to achievement level for one or more subjects. For example, all students from various homeroom classes of one grade level might be re-sorted into ability grouped classes for a period of reading instruction. Results indicate that regrouping for reading or mathematics can improve student achievement. However, the level and pace of instruction must be adapted to achievement level. Furthermore, students must not be regrouped for more than one or two subjects.

The Joplin Plan. This grouping plan assigns students to heterogeneous classes for most of the day but regroups them across grade levels for reading instruction. For example, a reading class at the fifth grade, first semester level might include high achieving fourth graders, average achieving fifth graders, and low achieving sixth graders. There is strong evidence that the Joplin Plan increases reading achievement.

Nongraded Plan. This plan includes a variety of related grouping plans that place students in flexible groups according to performance rather than age. Thus, grade-level designations are eliminated. The curriculum for each subject is divided into levels through which students progress at their own rates. Well-con-

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trolled studies conducted in regular schools generally support the use of comprehensive nongraded plans.

Within-class Ability Grouping. This plan is generally used for reading or mathematics. Teachers assign students within their classroom to one of a small number of groups based on ability level. These groups work on different materials at rates unique to their needs and abilities. Too few studies have been conducted on the use of within-class ability grouping in reading to support or challenge its effectiveness. Part of the problem is that within-class grouping is so widespread in reading instruction that it is difficult to conduct research that includes a control group not using the practice. Research on within-class ability grouping in mathematics clearly supports the practice, especially when only two or three groups are formed. The positive effects are slightly greater for low-achieving students than for average or high achievers.

What Should Schools and Teachers Do About Ability Grouping?

Slavin concludes that schools and teachers should use the methods proved most effective, such as within-class ability grouping in mathematics, nongraded plans in reading, and the Joplin Plan. The review recommends that schools find alternatives to the use of ability grouped class assignment, such as assigning students to self-contained classes according to general ability or performance level.

Based on his examination of the features of successful and unsuccessful practices, Slavin recommends that the following elements be included in successful ability grouping plans:

- Students should identify primarily with a heterogeneous class. They should be regrouped by ability only when reducing heterogeneity is particularly important for learning, as is the case with math or reading instruction.
- Grouping plans should reduce student heterogeneity in the specific skill being taught, not in IQ or overall achievement level.
- Grouping plans should allow for frequent reassessment of student placement and for easy reassignment based on student progress.
- Teachers must vary the level and pace of instruction according to student levels of readiness and learning rates in regrouped classes.
- Only a small number of groups should be formed in within-class ability grouping. This will allow the teacher to provide adequate direct instruction for each group.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Slavin, Robert E. *Ability Grouping and Student Achievement in Elementary Schools: A Best-Evidence Synthesis.* Baltimore, MD: Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, 1986.

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